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Martin E. Ross

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ALVIN N. MILLER--A BIOGRAPHY

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HISTORY 300

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## ALVIN N. MILLER--A BIOGRAPHY

On March 25, 1889, Alvin N. Miller, popularly known as A.N. Miller, was laid to rest in Laurel Grove Cemetery (lot 151) next to his wife, Sarah Jane McNish (who had died fifteen years earlier).<sup>1,2</sup> Miller's funeral was a special occasion in Savannah history for it marked the end of an era many consider Savannah's "Golden Age." While A.N. Miller lived in Savannah, he watched it rapidly develop from a small riverside community into a large industrial city. For example, the shipyards of Hutchinson Island produced what were the most powerful class of ships afloat to help handle Savannah's prospering cotton trade. Savannah's cotton profits and tax revenues allowed Savannah to pave and later light her streets. Although not a political giant, A.N. Miller influenced the city of Savannah. While serving each of his six terms as alderman of Savannah, A.N. Miller pushed for progress and business. When progress called, Miller helped to get the project started and more importantly to get either his business or a business in which he owned stock the construction contract. A.N. Miller, therefore, was at best, a "shady" politician. His life makes a Dallas plot look weak for A.N. Miller lived on the edge of a life of either boom or bust and damn everything in between. Approaching bankruptcy, Miller would save himself in time to avoid losing everything. Because of tax and mortgage default, he lost two tracts of land saving his glassworks factory. A.N. Miller, as the newspaper showed, was party where ever he went.

### I

From 1820 to 1830, A.N. Miller and John Roach, a friend, served as apprentices to a New York shipbuilder. While under apprenticeship,

John Roach worked on the armored British Steamer, the Aaron Manby, which had been damaged in a storm. John Roach took extensive notes on the armor plating, engine plant specifications, and other ship designs as well as the ship's problems. Roach later received fame for solving the problems of the British ship design. As Roach's close friend, Miller compiled books containing Roach's solutions to the Aaron Manby and some of Roach's own designs. These books were part of the reason Miller's career as a shipbuilder rocketed and were a plus to the Confederates when they started to design and build ironclads and blockade runners. Miller arrived in Savannah in the 1830's, and by 1835, he had begun his service as the superintendent at the Iron Steamboat Company which operated a lucrative river trade line between Savannah and Augusta.<sup>3</sup> Miller's job as superintendent gave him the financial base on which he built his foundry and machine shop--located at lot 5 on the eastern wharves.<sup>4</sup> In 1855 Miller was commissioned to build a steam locomotive engine for the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad. The locomotive was formally commemorated into service on July 17, 1855. Miller received high praise for the quality of the 15" bore and the 48" stroke.<sup>5</sup> Due to the lack of work orders and the competition of James Habersham and Thomas Ballantyme, Miller's business fell into serious financial straits; to save his company from bankruptcy in 1859, Miller sold almost forty percent of its stock to William Wade (May 31, 1859).<sup>6</sup> During 1860, A.N. Miller operated his company with a skeleton crew so that he would survive the on going nationwide depression as the country started to explode towards a civil war.

In 1861 after the secession of the Confederates States, Miller's machine business grew as he supplied the Confederates with much needed ammunition. On March 15, Miller shipped a thirty-two pounder seige gun

to the South Carolina Confederate Militia along with 200 rounds of shot and shell. South Carolina ordered six thousand more rounds of shot and shell while Georgia ordered an unlimited supply of shot and shell from Miller.<sup>7</sup> On April 12, 1861, just 28 days later, Miller's seige gun with other confederate guns fired on Ft. Sumter, the Civil War had begun. From here on until December 20, 1864, Miller's shop will produce at break-neck speeds more "three inch screws, rivets, three-quarter inch bolts, one-half inch washers, tin plank, wench timber, 15'x15' timber, and keybolts" than anything else. These small items were more important to the Confederate naval yards and forts than any gun ever forged but much less glorious in nature. On May 3rd, Miller continued to help the Southern cause by replacing the Green Island's stack and by sending the steamer 155 pounds of metal tools. May 11, 1861, Miller repaired the boiler on the General Clinch. On May 22, thirteen days after the completion of the Green Island job, sold more metal tools to the Confederate engineers. From August 22nd through September 20th, Miller delivered a twenty-four pounder gun with carriage and one hundred rounds of shot and shell to the Confederate engineers. On August 24, 1861, Miller fixed one traverse circle, replaced three traverse circle, and replaced 190 feet of 15'x15' timber on the Green Island. Three days later, Miller finished installing four traverse circle pintles on the St. Simons. Miller also installed two traverse circle pintles on the Scnises Point by 2 September; he installed seven traverse circle pintles on the Sophels and the Black Beam, two traverse circle pintles on the steamer Habersham, and four traverse circle pintles on the steamer Reliance. Seven days later, A.N. Miller finished installing two traverse circle pintles on the steamer Chatham. He also installed two thousand feet of tin plank on the Captain Screven on September 18, 1861. September's work receipts

were signed by Captain W.H. Echols of the Confederate Army Department of Engineers. On December 20, 1861, Miller repairs the pumps at Ft. Pulaski. In April of 1862 Miller once again races against time to fill the Confederate order. April 29, 1862, Miller delivers a ten inch mortar with one center pintle for Causton's Bluff Battery. On May 20, he replaced the 24 pounder gun, repaired the traverse circle, and replaced 16 keybolts at Warsaw Battery. On the 21st of October 1862, Miller's crowning achievement, the floating battery Georgia, was launched from the eastern wharves. Miller designed and built the Georgia--thus making it his largest work for the Confederacy. From December 22, 1862, until January 2, 1863, he replaced a boiler on an unnamed ship and on Christmas Eve 1862, Miller repaired the government scales in Savannah.<sup>8</sup>

In 1863 the Confederates experienced bad times and as a direct result Miller's business depleted. March 23, 1863, Miller used eleven precious tons of iron on the Whip Sam. From June through September 1863, Miller completely overhauled the steamer Ida which had obtained extensive damage from Union ships. August 8, 1863, the Clay received new wench timber. By August of 1864, Miller had to shut down most of his operations due to a decline in orders. Desperate for iron, Miller ran newspaper advertisements on August 30th for the purchase of any type of iron that would be sold to him.<sup>9</sup> In December 1864, Confederate troops that were abandoning Savannah before Sherman's advance burned all of the eastern wharves district including Miller's foundry and machine shop. Miller found renewed strength for 1865 and took the helm of the Usina and Jones Shipyard on Hutchinson Island from November 4, 1870 until January 1, 1871.<sup>10</sup>

In 1868 after reopening his foundry, Miller completed an iron suspension bridge from the bluff to the island. The bridge was set in place on May 13, 1868.<sup>11</sup> Later in 1868 on September 27th, Miller launched

his Islander from Willink's shipyard. Designed and built by Miller for Savannah river trade, the Islander generated capital that Miller had lost because of unpaid war receipts.<sup>12</sup> On New Year's day 1869, Miller hired Barnard Monahan, James Manning, and David Fitzgerald of Monahan, Manning, and Co. to bring even more capital into his foundry.<sup>13</sup> This hiring caused Miller to form a company. In 1870, Miller's foundry is not heard from. On February 9, 1871, A.N. Miller founded the Steam Flow and Transportation Company of Georgia.<sup>14</sup>

## II

Besides being a businessman, Miller actively engaged in the politics of Savannah. Early in the 1830's, he joined the Young Men's Democratic-Republican Party. A zealous member, active party thrower, and assistant party thrower when others were in charge, Miller quickly became known to the more powerful members of the party and established a reputation as a staunch anti-Whig--pro Tyler man. In the 1840's Miller's political career flourished. He was elected as a representative of Chatham County to the Democratic Convention of Georgia to be held in May in Atlanta.<sup>15</sup> He also received an appointment to the committee of arrangements for the Young Democrats Festival to be held on April 22, 1841.<sup>16</sup> After the May convention, Miller slowed down politically until the fall of 1841. In September 1841, Miller was really active in the militia unit, the Republican Blues of which he had been a member since 1835.<sup>17</sup> As the summer of 1842 faded away, the festival committee swung back into action. To insure that the festival would be well attended (especially by young ladies), the committee ran numerous advertisements in the Daily Georgian from September 2 to October 21, 1842, advertising October 21 as the day of the event.<sup>18</sup> The festival's purpose was to gain support for the Democrats against the Whigs and to get A.N. Miller support for the 1842



election. On August 13, 1842, the Democrats announced their candidates for office including A.N. Miller for alderman.<sup>19</sup> On September 6, 1842, Miller and the Democrats won the election.<sup>20</sup> As soon as the votes had been counted and the new mayor elected by the new council, the Whigs (in the September 13 issue of the Daily Georgian) accused the Democrats of fixing the election. The Whigs claimed that there were more votes than registered voters and that some of the names were taken from gravestones in the cemeteries.<sup>21</sup> Nothing ever became of the Whigs' accusations. To celebrate their victory, the Democrats threw a party for which Miller served as vice-chairman of the organizing committee.<sup>22</sup> As the new year of 1843 began, A.N. Miller helped push the fire department's petition for a brick cistern through the council. Miller had served on the drafting committee for the petition.<sup>23</sup> As the fourth of July approached, Miller and the Republican Blues sparked the celebration with Miller's reading of the U.S. Constitution on July 1 to a formation of the Republican Blues.<sup>24</sup> Corporal Miller repeated his patriotic gesture on the third with the reading of the Declaration of Independence and again on the seventh with the reading of the U.S. Constitution. While Miller visited family and friends in New York during the first two weeks of August, the Democrats nominated him for reelection as alderman of Savannah.<sup>25</sup> On August 18, 1843, Miller was named to the Light Creek Committee which consumed most of his time and thus hampering his campaign for reelection. On election day September 2, 1843, Miller had lost his office.<sup>26</sup>

In 1852 Miller returned to city government in the appointed position of Chief Fire Engineer of Savannah. Miller held the position for eleven months and fourteen days after which he resigned to run for alderman in 1853.<sup>27</sup> Failing to win the 1853 election, Miller campaigned hard for the 1854 election for alderman. Miller used festivals, parties,

newspaper advertisements, and door to door campaigns to boost his chances of being elected in the December 2nd election. Miller won this time giving him his second term as alderman.<sup>28</sup> His term quickly passed and he failed to get reelected until 1856 but lost a fourth term in 1857.<sup>29</sup> During the Civil War, Miller was far too busy to consider politics, but after the Civil War, Miller turned to regaining lost capital through a city council position of alderman in 1865. Although failing to win election in 1865, Miller returned to office as alderman in 1866 with a vengeance.<sup>30</sup> During the campaign, Miller was fined forty dollars for failure to show for jury duty and lost a tract of land along the Vernon River because of a tax default.<sup>31</sup> However, on October 10, 1866, he wins the election and serves his fourth term as alderman.<sup>32</sup> On December 3, 1866, Miller helped push a bill through the council for a new pump in Calhoun Square. The bill benefitted Miller especially since his company was contracted to construct the new pump.<sup>33</sup> Miller kept out of trouble in 1867 and managed to get reelected as alderman to the Savannah's seventy-eighth administration thus serving his fifth term.<sup>34</sup> Miller was elected to the board of directors of the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad on April 30, 1867.<sup>35</sup> In 1868 Miller was reelected as a board member to the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad. To celebrate his board position Alderman Miller pushed through a bill on July 23, 1868, that granted the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad a limited franchise through Savannah with a ten cent charge for travel throughout the city.<sup>36</sup> On September 25, 1868, Miller helped get the franchise for the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad expanded to include everything except freight.<sup>37</sup> Miller was reelected for his sixth and final term as alderman in 1868. On February 2, 1869, Miller tried to push a Springfield Plantation drainage bill through the council,

but it is held up by Alderman Waring.<sup>38</sup> The bill would have the city drain Springfield Plantation (Miller was part owner) at the city's cost without charging the owners of the Springfield Plantation.<sup>39</sup> Miller successfully supported the passage of a bill on June 24, 1869, which gave the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad the right of way through Abercorn Street.<sup>40</sup> On July 10, 1869, the city council met to propose a solution to cure the contaminated water of Savannah. The council made three suggestions to cure the problems. On A.N. Miller's recommendation, the council chose the third suggestion--building the new water works two miles up Musgrove Creek from the old water works on the city's Davis Property (site of McLeod Mill, 78 acres).<sup>41</sup> The new waterworks contract was awarded to none other than A.N. Miller, but the plant was not opened until 1881.<sup>42</sup> July 24, 1869, Miller pushes the Springfield Plantation drainage bill through. The passage of the bill was important to Miller because he was the committee head of the citizen's board for the Drainage of the Springfield Plantation.<sup>43</sup> On August 5, 1869, Miller got all of Hutchinson Island rezoned for shipbuilding (Miller was still the head of the Usina and Jones Shipyard)--a move most definitely for himself.<sup>44</sup> Miller's last act as alderman helped guide through a bill granting \$1800 of city land to the Independent Presbyterian Church.<sup>45</sup> On the 19th of October 1869, A.N. Miller left alderman office permanently.

In 1872, Miller was back in politics when he accepted the job of being Chatham County delegate to the Democratic Convention in Georgia.<sup>46</sup> On December 6, 1872 he was nominated for tax return receiver but failed to get appointed.<sup>47</sup> In 1874 Miller started to return to government service. On January 15, he was appointed to his first term as Port Warden.<sup>48</sup> In 1875 Miller was reappointed Port Warden for a second term.<sup>49</sup> In 1875 he also was appointed as a jury commissioner to study and to revise the

jury boxes of Chatham County. He finished his revision in 1880.<sup>50</sup> In 1876 Miller was appointed for a third term as Port Warden.<sup>51</sup> Miller was not reappointed to Port Warden in 1877. In 1878 Miller regained his appointment as Port Warden for the fourth time. He would hold this job for three more consecutive terms (until 1881).<sup>52</sup> In 1881 Miller delivered and installed artesian pumps for the artesian wells at the new waterworks. These pumps and wells for the new waterworks were installed at the site A.N. Miller had fought so hard for in 1869. The construction of the pumps served as A.N. Miller's last job as a machinist. He sold his shares in the foundry and machine shop and became the Superintendent of Water Works from 1881 until his death in 1889. After all, who could better run and repair the pumps than the man who had built them.<sup>53</sup>

### III

A.N. Miller's life began with his birth in 1814 in New York City.<sup>54</sup> In his late teens Miller arrives in Savannah. From 1836 until 1880 Miller served the Republican Blues Militia from which he retired as captain.<sup>55</sup> In 1842 Miller founded the Olgethorpe Lodge No. 1 of the International Organization of Odd Fellows. Two years later he was appointed the first Grand Master in Georgia.<sup>56</sup> To celebrate their charter members, the Odd Fellows were to hold a festival on January 10, 1844 (however, it was rescheduled to the twentieth because of rain).<sup>57</sup> In 1879 the Odd Fellows held a fishing trip to honor their only living charter member--A.N. Miller.<sup>58</sup> Miller began his real estate collection in 1843 with the purchase of the Mordens and Springfield Plantation along the Vernon River.<sup>59</sup> In 1858 he purchases a house at R5 Columbia Square and the foundry he built is located at 123 York Street. In 1859 Miller and his family lived with James King until 1866 when he buys a house at the southwest corner of Bull and Jones Streets. In 1867, the Millers moved

to No. 6 Gordon Block.<sup>60</sup> In 1871 Miller's land tract near the Vernon River was sold by Sheriff James Dooner for default on taxes.<sup>61</sup> During 1873, Miller ran into more trouble. On November 5, 1873, the sheriff again seized property on the Vernon River for Miller's default on a "\$1600 mortgage fi fa Georgian Mutual Loan Association."<sup>62</sup> Miller also paid a fine plus back taxes on his glassworks during this same period.<sup>63</sup> On the 23rd of March in 1847 at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, Alvin Miller (age 31) married Mrs. Sarah Jane McNish (age 26).<sup>64</sup> This marriage lasted until Mrs. McNish died at the age of 53 because of an ovarian tumor (March 16, 1874). Dr. Bulloch arrived too late to the 139 Liberty Street address. On March 18, 1874, she was laid to rest in lot 151 in the Laurel Grove Cemetery.<sup>65</sup> On March 23, 1889, Miller became suddenly ill due to stomach cramps. Dr. R.B. Harris was called, but suddenly Miller died at the age of seventy-five on March 25, 1889 of congestion of the liver and bowels.<sup>66</sup> The funeral reception was held at 253 Bolton Street by his sister, Mrs. Jane A. Symons. He was laid to rest on the right side of his wife at 4:00 p.m. on 25 March 1889.<sup>67</sup>

When the A.N. Miller estate was settled, two shotguns, a gold pocket watch, a gold pen, and many books were taken along with \$598 of city bonds, \$143.75 in I.O.O.F. bonds, and \$247.28 in cash which were all distributed to his relatives. The personal items were sold at auction. The books of which A.N. Miller was to become famous were sold for five dollars. The young man who came from New York in the 1830's to make a name for himself did so as alderman, Port Warden, owner of two industrial companies--the Steam Plow and Transportation Company and Miller's Foundry and Machine Shop, captain in the Republican Blues, jury commissioner, Chief Fire Engineer,

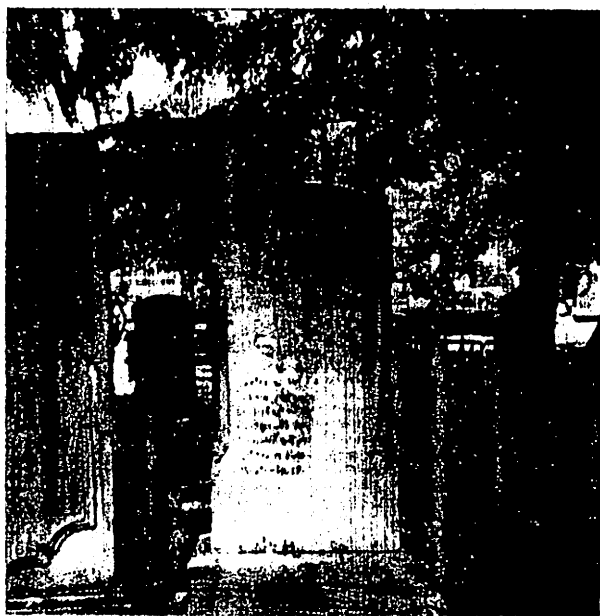
and Superintendent of the Savannah Waterworks. It is a tragedy that Alvin N. Miller died before realizing his life long goals of fortune and fame.

## GENEEOLOGY

Alvin N. Miller and his wife, Sarah, had no offspring thus their line ended with their deaths. Alvin had seven siblings among which his estate was divided: William L. Miller (deceased), David Miller (New York City), Mrs. M.E. Stanford (New York City), Thomas Miller (deceased), Mrs. Lou M. Bockee (Patterson, N.J.), A.M. Miller (New York City), and Mrs. Jane A. Symons (Savannah, GA.). William L. Miller's share was sent to his widow, Louise Miller, and their children--Annie S., William P., Charles A., Hattie E., and Loamatine. Thomas Miller's share was given to his heirs: his widow, Lizzie Miller, and his daughter, Billie Fagan.<sup>69</sup> In 1850 Jane Ann Miller (1832-1902) became the second wife of William R. Symons (1812-1883) in New York.<sup>70</sup> They moved to 168 Liberty Street in Savannah, Georgia, where due to constraints of time, I wasn't able to carry their line any further.<sup>71</sup>



Tombstones of the Miller family (above).  
Tombstone of Alvin Norman Miller (below).





# END NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup>Chatham County Department of Vital Records, Death Certificate, Alvin N. Miller, sec. M, 1889.
- <sup>3</sup>Gordon B. Smith, "Miller, Alvin N.," The Gordon B. Smith Handbook (Savannah: Smith), vol. 2.
- <sup>4</sup>Charles Ellis Waring and Elizabeth Stewart. Savannah and Its Environs (Savannah: Waring and Stewart, 1970), p. 20.
- <sup>5</sup>"Steam Engine Commissioned," Daily Morning News, 17 July 1855, p. 1, col. 2-3.
- <sup>6</sup>Advertisement, Daily Morning News, 31 May 1859, p. 2, col. 2.
- <sup>7</sup>"A Visit to Miller's Foundry," Daily Morning News, 15 March 1861, p. 1, col. 1.
- <sup>8</sup>Quarter Master Corps of the Confederate Army, "Citizens File-Alvin N. Miller," Microfilm, Confederate War and Treasury Department Vouchers Confederate Archives Division of the Adjutant General's Office, 1861- 1864. Found under the National Archives of the United States (1934) vol. 364-685, p. 247-263.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 264-267.
- <sup>10</sup>Smith, vol. 2.
- <sup>11</sup>"Bridge Commissioned," Daily News Herald, 13 May 1868, p. 3, col. 1.
- <sup>12</sup>"Miller's Islander," Savannah Morning News, 28 September 1868, p. 3, col. 1.
- <sup>13</sup>"Miller Association," Savannah Morning News, 1 January 1869, p. 3, col. 2.
- <sup>14</sup>Advertisement, Daily News Herald, 9 February 1871, p. 3, col. 2.
- <sup>15</sup>Advertisement, Daily Georgian, 8 April 1841, p. 2, col. 2.
- <sup>16</sup>Advertisement, Daily Georgian, 22 April 1841, p. 2, col. 2.
- <sup>17</sup>Republican Blues Minute Book, 1808-1884, Savannah, Ga, p. 320.

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- 19 Advertisement, Daily Georgian, 13 August 1842, p. 2, col. 2.
- 20 Advertisement, Daily Georgian, 6 September 1842, p. 2, col. 2.
- 21 Advertisement, Daily Georgian, 13 September 1842, p. 2, col. 2.
- 22 Advertisement, Daily Georgian, 17 September 1842, p. 2, col. 2.
- 23 "Minutes of the City Council Meeting," Daily Georgian, 4 January 1843, p. 3, col. 4.
- 24 "Celebrating the National Holiday," Daily Georgian, 1 July 1843, p. 2, col. 4.
- 25 "Celebrating the National Holiday," Daily Georgian, 4 July 1843, p. 2, col. 6 and "Celebrating the National Holiday," Daily Georgian, 7 July 1843, p. 2, col. 4.
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- 28 Thomas Gamble, History of the City Government (Savannah: Savannah Morning News Steam Press, 1900), p. 17.
- 29 "Election Returns," Daily Morning News, 2 December 1854, p. 2, col. 3.
- 30 Gamble, p. 17.
- 31 "Fines for Jury Duty," Daily News Herald, 28 April 1866, p. 2, col. 5.
- 32 Advertisement, Daily News Herald, 17 May 1866, p. 2, col. 6.
- 33 "Minutes of the City Council Meeting," Daily News Herald, 3 December 1866, p. 2, col. 4.
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66 Chatham County Department of Vital Records, Death Certificate, Alvin N. Miller, sec. M, 1869.

67 Laurel Grove Cemetery Keeper's Records, vol. II, G-M, Savannah, Ga., 1852-1938.

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